Ark and Youth Pact position paper: Distinguishing elements of youth work

This position paper is based on Mark Hammond's PhD (2018) *entitled 'The Point of Encounter: An investigation into the purpose, processes and theory underpinning youth work practice'.* [1] This paper refers to two distinct aspects of Hammond's research:

1. Theory and literature which identifies five defining characteristics of youth work
2. Analysis of Hammond's research findings which he presents as a new practice model of four key youth work processes

These are presented in this paper as foundational theories to understand youth work. Elements of these have become more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This roundtable event will bring together academics, policy makers, leaders from the youth work sector and government departmental officials (North and South) to distil some of the learning from this period and consider the practice and policy recommendations to be derived from these insights. Questions are posed at the end of this paper in relation to the compatibility of youth work methodologies with policy directives, revealing both opportunities and challenges.

These questions form the basis of the discussion at the policy roundtable event.

The defining characteristics and nature of youth work have been articulated by a range of writers (Jeffs and Smith 2005, 2010; Davies 2005, 2010, 2015; Harland and Morgan 2006; Young 2006; In Defence of Youth Work 2011; Dickson et al. 2013). The five most central themes are discussed here:

1. Young People

Youth work, with its focus on young people, is an age-specific activity. While the age range varies from region to region, for example in Northern Ireland, 4-18, with some support for those aged 19-25 (Department of Education 2013) and in the Republic of Ireland are aged 10-24 years (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2015), the central focus of youth work is commonly on the teenage years. Davies (2005, p.7) suggests that a defining characteristic of youth work is that young people should be *"perceived and received as young people"*. This not only recognises young people as individuals, but also challenge the negative labels that are associated with them. It places value and respect on the young person, esteeming them and advocating for their place in society.

2. Voluntary Participation

Davies (2005) proposes that *voluntary participation* is a defining feature of youth work. The voluntary principle emphasises the choice that young people make when getting involved in youth work and asserts that the young person should hold a high degree of power in the relationship with the worker. Ultimately, they are freely able to engage or disengage with the youth work process. This distinguishing characteristic enables a more equal relationship where dialogue rather than imposition is the focus and consequently leads to the young person exercising personal judgement and self-efficacy.

[1] Full text of phd including references for this paper is available at https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/an-investigation-into-the-purpose-processes-and-theory-underpinni

3. Association

Jeffs and Smith (2010) argue that association, relationship and community are distinguishing features of youth work. Doyle and Smith (1999) further recognise the *"educative power of playing one's part in a group or association"* (cited in Jeffs and Smith 2010, p.3). This notion of association is for young people to know the sensations and emotions of companionship, while also having *"the experience of learning to live cooperatively"* (Knowles, 1950 cited in Smith, 2012, p.2). More recently the campaign group, *In Defence of Youth Work* (2011, p.7), articulated association as a cornerstone for youth work practice and emphasise the importance of fostering "*supportive relationships"* as central to this. In Northern Ireland, with its socio-political conflict, 'interdependence' has become a defining principle in youth work (Department of Education 2003). While not synonymous with the concept of association, it places a strong emphasis on community, relationships and fostering of a sense of belonging. Working in this collective way, Davies (2005, 2015) argues, reaches into the culture of young people, acknowledges their peer networks and meets them on their terms. Association favours the collective and places a value on working with young people in groups and with their peers.

4. Democracy

Democracy in youth work terms, presents a paradigm shift from the other power relationships that exist between young people and adults. For democracy to flourish, this relationship should be marked by *"mutual respect, a concern for other's needs, and a belief in community"* (Jeffs and Smith 2005 p. 56). This is an overarching principle that defines youth work as a practice which considers power as a key factor in learning. *In Defence of Youth Work* (2011, p.7) calls for an insistence upon a *"democratic practice"* where every effort should be made for young people to *"play the fullest part in making decisions about anything affecting them".* This assertion places power, participation and democracy firmly at the centre of youth work. Davies (2005) suggests that tipping power in favour of the young person; working with them on their terms; and nurturing personal commitment rather than compliance, are principles and ideas which give greater control to the young person. Jeffs and Smith (2005 p.55) further argue that fostering democracy enables young people to "*learn and organise things for themselves".*

5. Education and Welfare

Jeffs and Smith (2010) argue the purposeful goals of education and welfare have been defining elements since the foundation of youth work. The welfare element of youth work has been evident since early philanthropic activities with homeless young men in the 1850s, with organisations like the YMCA (Young 2006). More recently welfare functions have evolved into more contemporary interventions such as counselling, careers advice and support groups.

Most definitions of youth work emphasise its educational and developmental focus over its welfare function. Mahony (2001) goes further, suggesting that youth work's singular aim is education. He contends that youth work is informal education whereby the environment is central to the learning process. Unlike structure and content-driven formal education, the informality of youth work and the processes involved are the tools that support the learning (Ord 2016). Harland et al. (2005) highlight how youth work can impact on both formal educational outcomes, such as improved academic attainment, and non-formal outcomes, such as increased confidence, health promotion and young people learning about themselves and for themselves. The aims of youth work are contested but the processes are not. There is agreement that youth work processes focus on learning through conversation, experience and relationship, with an emphasis on democracy (Jeffs and Smith 2005 & 2010; Davies 2005 & 2015; Young 2006; Batsleer 2008; *In Defence of Youth Work* 2011; Ord 2016).

Four Emerging Processes

Several processes with underpinning principles, practices and philosophies are central to youth work. Following the systematic analysis of research data and literature, four key processes have emerged: a) relationship building, b) conversation, c) participation and d) learning through experience. Hammond (2018) found that youth workers engage in these four processes to produce outcomes for young people.

A) Relationship Building

The importance of building relationships with young people was not seen *as a purpose* but *a basis for the work* with the young person. It was seen to facilitate the building of skills and trust while at the same time supporting young people to learn. For some, relationship building generated the ***"space for change"***, in order to bring about transformation. Relationship building created a safe space to challenge the young people, thereby fostering a culture of learning.

This research suggests that youth workers regard the relationship with the young people as a 'journey' and favoured the idea of 'accompanying' young people on their terms rather than working to presupposed agendas or predetermined outcomes.

Youth workers recognise the need for a non-judgemental relationship that has high levels of acceptance for the young person. Nonetheless, their draw to challenging the young people to bring about learning was at the centre of their thinking. According to literature, being congruent or genuine means that if the relationship with the learner is real and free from façade, then the educator will be more effective (Rogers and Freiberg 1994). Developing genuine relationships with young people was paramount for all the respondents. Relationships which help to bring about wisdom and enable a freedom to learn are the stated focus of youth work practice.

B) Conversation and Dialogue

The process of conversation and dialogue is inextricably linked with that of relationship building. Whilst conversation leads to relationships with young people, building a relationship is equally a way of enabling the conversation to move deeper. The intertwined connection between these two processes demonstrates interdependence within this learning process. This reflects the connection between dialogue and building strong relationships in enabling transformative learning (Mezirow 2003).

Dialogue and conversation are processes to get beyond the initial contact and rapport and getting the young people to think and develop ideas for themselves. The literature indicates the importance of moving beyond initial chit chat and banter to more intentional and purposeful engagement with the young person (Ord 2016a). Furthermore, deepening the discourse aligns with Jeffs and Smith's (2005) view of conversation and the level of engagement that is needed to help facilitate change. The authors promote the idea of 'trusting in conversation' in order to be with the young person *"rather than seeking to act upon them"* (ibid., p.31). Many youth workers regard the two-way nature of the conversation as promoting a more equal learning environment.

In his pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire (2007, p.40) states that "*critical understanding leads to critical action".* The focus for youth work practitioners is to enable young people to think more deeply about themselves and to change or act upon their new thinking. The youth worker's role is then to challenge them *"to do something better"* or to help them to initiate change through conversation. This emphasis on change certainly aligns well with the action-orientation focus which Freire (1970) advocates.

Sharing power with young people is central to youth work. The tacit and explicit support for engaging with young people on an equal basis means that their needs are met and addressed

through dialogue rather than a predetermined agenda or curricula. When power is distributed more equally between the youth worker and the young person then a consensual and agreed outcome can be achieved.

C) Participation

Of the four processes explored in this study, participation is perhaps the most easily recognised, yet, evidence suggests, the least understood. Youth workers have a wide range of perspectives on participation, with the continuum of expression ranging from 'just taking part' to deeper insights on power relationships and control. Youth workers' vocabulary includes ideas about young people having their say in the issues that affect them; 'having their voices heard'; 'control'; 'ownership' and 'power'.

Whilst the literature stresses the political dimension of participation (Arnstein 1969; Crick 2004) and its educational process for increasing the learning experience (Dewey 2007), the respondents rarely referred to these themes. Instead, few recognised the political dimension in their practice and showed a basic understanding of participation processes in practice.

D) Learning through Experience

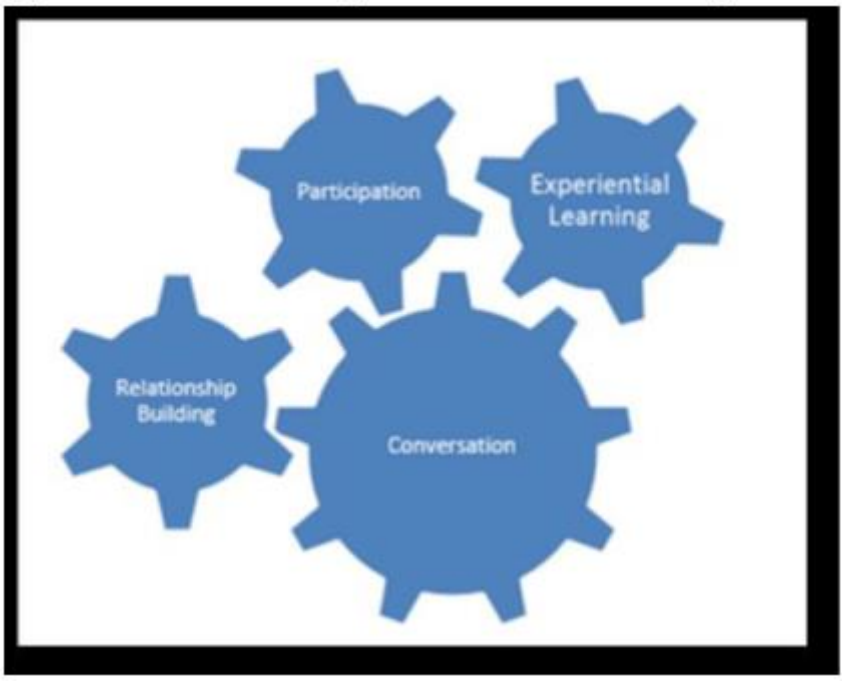
Dewey (1997) posits that at the heart of learning is the experience of the learner and that this experience is not in isolation of a context nor from the relationships with others.

While not all respondents demonstrated a full understanding of the role of experience in their youth work, they recognised *a connection* between the experience and learning. With a relationship between the youth worker and the young person, the worker can enter a participative dialogue and assist the young person to make sense of their experience. Jeffs and Smith (2005) make connections to John Dewey's ideas, proposing that the youth worker's role is to assist young people to gain *"a greater understanding or appreciation of their experiences"* (p.59).

An emerging model

The model emerging from Hammond's research is one which places conversation as the central cog of all the youth work processes (Fig 1).

Fig 1 Conversation as the cog which drives the other three processes



Contrary to other learning processes, conversation and dialogue emphasise a two-way co-learning relationship and the strive for equality in the educative process. In such a model, young people can articulate their needs and find the freedom to learn for themselves (Rogers and Freiberg 1994). It is through this dialogical experience that learners come together to encounter each other in an authentic way.

Concluding Questions for Roundtable Discussion

Having here considered the purpose and processes related to the role of youth work, several questions arise that can help shape future policy and practice. These include:

1. (a) How have we seen the processes, values and principles of youth work in practice during the pandemic?
   (b) How might these processes be embedded in future policy responses for full populations of young people or more focused actions for those with more acute needs?

2. (a) What are the opportunities for embedding youth work processes, values and principles in government/public policy and decision-making?
   (b) What are the tensions of this approach within public policy and how might these be mitigated or managed?

3. (a) How can we manage the tensions of funders and policy-makers (of having pre-determined or quantitative outcomes) with a practice that is process-driven?
   (b) How can the process be captured in reporting or monitoring mechanisms that support the work?

4. (a) What areas or themes related to young people would warrant greater North-South sharing and learning?
   (b) What policies or structures could support or be developed towards greater North-South Alignment and collaboration?